

VALEDICTORY

TO THE

GRADUATING CLASS

OF THE

Philadelphia College of Medicine,

DELIVERED IN THE

Chinese Museum, July 12, 1848,

BY PROFESSOR THOS. D. MITCHELL.

PUBLISHED BY THE GRADUATING CLASS.

PHILADELPHIA:

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1848,

PROFESSOR T. D. MITCHELL—

Sir—Being impressed with the worth and eloquence of your Valedictory Address, we are forced to request a copy of the same for publication.

Yours, &c.

W. HENRY WHITE, S. C. }
M. M. CARTER, Ga. } *Committee.*
J. C. CALHOUN, Jr., S. C. }

JULY 12, 1848.

GENTLEMEN—

I comply with your request—my address is at your disposal.

Very respectfully,

THOS. D. MITCHELL.

To W. H. WHITE, M. D.,
M. M. CARTER, M. D.,
J. C. CALHOUN, JR., M. D.

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN OF THE GRADUATING CLASS:

In attempting to discharge the duty assigned to me on this occasion, I will not suppress the embarrassment engendered by the reflection, that I cannot make the present interview either interesting or profitable. Valedictory, as well as introductory essays have become stale and common-place. The themes befitting such addresses have long been exhausted, and one must be well skilled in gathering up his wits, to indite a few sentences with point enough to fix the attention of an auditory. What shall I say then, gentlemen, at this parting hour? We have talked to you for months, on the great truths of practical medicine, and yet it could well be said, as on a former occasion, "the half has not been told." But, we have never before had the task to perform, of uttering to a class of Philadelphia graduates, the painful farewell, that crowds into a point, a thousand reminiscences of the past, and is too big for utterance, with the creative anticipations of fancy, in respect of the distant future. The melancholy thought that we shall never look upon each other's faces more, on earth; the certainty that some of us, ere long, shall be forced to dwell in the narrow house, the last legacy of mortality; and the fearful apprehension that any may, perchance, make mournful bankruptcy of character and fortune; ah! these, and kindred musings of the soul, in such a scene as this, invest the reality with a melancholy interest, that puts language in the blush, in her most vigorous efforts to paint the tragedy. Ours is not a fancy meeting, gentlemen—like leaves of autumn, we are destined to be scattered to the East, and the West, to the North, and the South. Very soon, you are to test the value of the great principles imparted during your connexion with the college; and to stand forth as living monuments of the benign influence of well directed study, or to shrink to insignificance, and perish in oblivion, because of infidelity to the sublime cause in which you profess to have embarked. These are solemn considerations, and well demand our deepest solicitude.

Your transition state of pupillage has closed forever. And you are here, at this hour, as brethren of an honored profession, young and inexperienced, bouyant with hope, and well nigh overwhelmed with antieipation of glory and renown, far

off in the dizzy distance. What better service can I render at such a time, than to proffer the admonitions of observation and experience? Let me beg your patient attention to one or two points of counsel, that may hereafter come happily to your remembrance, when he who utters them, shall have ceased to be.

Our first item relates to *the duties of physicians to themselves*, and as this is necessarily co-extensive with the entire professional life of the practitioner, it cannot be expected, that the whole field will be surveyed on this occasion. Such an attempt would be a tax on your kindness, that I am not disposed to inflict. As best calculated to serve our purpose, we prefer to notice the early career of the physician, in the full persuasion that if it be free from palpable errors and inconsistencies, we may augur favorably of maturer and yet more advanced life.

Let us look, then, for a few moments, at the young physician who has finished, as he appears to think, his medical education, and stands forth a candidate for business. He has hung out his sign, in due form, and the columns of the newspaper have proclaimed his readiness to be the servant of the people, at any hour, day or night, when not professionally engaged. And thus far, every thing seems to be precisely right. The young aspirant may have friends enough, and money too, both of which are exceedingly convenient and desirable; or, he may have neither, and be compelled to try his fortune single-handed, penniless, and it may be, in debt. But these things, after all, are mere contingencies, as they relate to the grand issue; trifles lighter than the air, in comparison with the grave query which every young man, who calls himself a *Doctor*, should decide, and must decide, to the satisfaction of his own conscience.

The young man may have procured a Diploma in the regular course of collegiate discipline; or he may have passed through a laborious curriaculum of study in a private office, unaided by the advantages of public instruction, and he may offer for patronage, without any kind of legal license to practice physic. Of such variant materials is our profession composed, in many parts of this great republic, nor does it become me to decide, which of the two will make the better *Doctor*. There is a real strength of mind, a special fitness for the practical duties of our profession, that may carry a man most triumphantly through the drudgery of private pupilage, and finally make him a successful and respectable practitioner. And there is a sort of intellectual listlessness, a want of adaptation to the details of professional life, that will blunt the keen edge of the ablest

collegiate teaching, and nullify the value of the best diploma in the old or the new world.

By whatever route the young doctor may have travelled, to gain the cognomen by which he is hereafter to be known, the most important question for him to settle, ere he ventures to prescribe for a patient, is this: "am I competent to enter upon these high responsibilities?" Little as he may have read, and superficially as he may have studied, he knows as well as any other man, that he is radically defective, if such be the fact, and that a thousand diplomas would be a sorry substitute for intellectual furniture and common sense. If his conscience be not incurably seared, and absolutely insensible, he will be forced to ask himself the weighty question, in secrecy and the honesty of solitude, "am I qualified?" This is the centre, the soul of all the duties he may hereafter be required to discharge to professional brethren and to community, and settle it he must, sooner or later.

I do not mean to say, that before a young physician enters on professional business, he must be prepared for all the varieties of embarrassing and difficult cases, for which nothing less than actual experience ever qualified any man. Such an assertion would argue a little more good sense than the blundering son of the Emerald isle evinced, when he vowed his unalterable purpose never to go into the water, until he had learned how to swim. But I do say, unhesitatingly, that no man is at liberty to take human life into custody, as a medical counsellor, who has not faithfully studied the laws and principles of medicine, and become acquainted with the complex structure of the living machine, whose erratic motions he professes to be able to rectify. With less than this amount of knowledge, he is bound, in duty to himself, not less than from a regard to his fellow men, to abandon the profession.

It may be, however, that the scientific and literary attainments of the young doctor are above suspicion, and that his talents are of the highest order; and yet the experience of one or two years may suffice to assure him that he is not in the sphere for which nature intended him. For the untiring duties of a professional career, he may have no obvious qualification, that his best friends can detect. He may be too sensitive to be the constant witness of griefs that art cannot cure; or he may be so callous to the woes of suffering humanity, as to make him repulsive and disgusting. His love of other pursuits, his aversion to self-denial, or his dissatisfaction with so slow a process for acquiring wealth; these and fifty other considerations may stand forth so prominently, as to tell him emphati-

cally, that he is in a wrong position. Duty to his own personal comfort, and regard to his future character should prompt him to relinquish his present pursuits.

It not unfrequently happens, that young men, whose early education was very defective, are found in the ranks of our profession. The incongruous mixture of mental strength with decrepid discipline, and less than half cultivated intellect, strike us so forcibly, that we cannot be mistaken, and the view fills us with sadness. But if there be the right kind of basis, rest assured, that the superstructure is susceptible of polish and of symmetry, even in adult life. And the first, the highest duty a young physician in this dilemma owes to himself, is to go to work like a man, to make amends for the sad defects of youthful training. In the early years of professional life, he can find leisure enough to devote to literary pursuits; and a just perception of his need of cultivation will be an unfailing guarantee of success. I knew a citizen of Pennsylvania, who, on his first election to the legislature, could not write a letter that was not sadly blurred with errors in grammar and orthography. He was over forty years of age, possessed of vigorous intellect, and conscious of defective education. He resolved to rise above these difficulties, in the high way of political elevation; and although faithful in the discharge of official duty, by day, the midnight taper was the steady witness of his toils; and in that individual his native State found at last, one of the most substantial and useful executives that ever withheld the destinies of the commonwealth. If I address any young physicians or young men who soon expect to practice medicine, and whose early education was neglected, let me urge upon them the imperative duty of rectifying their defects by a prompt and zealous devotion to every means that may be calculated to place them on a footing of equality in this respect, with many whose professional attempts are inferior to theirs.

An obvious feature in the duties of physicians to themselves, is a fixed determination to be as useful, as respectable, as eminent as possible. Has God given you the power to rise high in your profession, and will you neglect the boon, and be content with the inglorious position of idleness? Will any dare to prostitute talent and opportunity, because the uphill path of science demands of all who would reach the proud summit, a constant exercise of self-denial? And how is it possible for the uneducated physician, he who has not attended to the cultivation of his mind as he should, and as he might have done, to rise in the estimation of his brethren, and of society, by wielding the pen in the cause of medical literature,

as others have essayed to do, whose professional skill and research are not equal to his? There are, at this hour, not a few of the profession, whose habits of observation and acute discernment have put them in possession of valuable facts, which they cannot turn to good account, because of literary incapacity, which might have been surmounted long ago, by vigorous efforts to make amends for the deficiencies of early life. If any of you, gentlemen, are in this sad dilemma, and yet anticipating a day not far distant, when the trumpet voice of Fame will tell your achievements to posterity, awake from the fatal delusion now, and resolve, in full view of the work to be done, never to be satisfied with any thing short of a full reparation of the evils inflicted upon you by neglect or ignorance of those to whom your youthful culture was entrusted.

Live not, as though you had been born for naught,
 Save like the brutes, to perish. What do they,
 But crop the grass, and die? You have been taught
 A nobler lesson—that within the clay
 Upon the mind's high altar, burns a ray
 Flashed from divinity.—And shall it shine
 Fitful and feebly? rather let it blaze,
 It's heaven lit coruscations, all the world around.

But the young physician, just about to enter into professional life, has another duty to perform in relation to himself, of paramount importance. He is about to launch his barque on the bosom of a strange, an untried, a perilous ocean, far off, it may be, from the salutary restraints and kind counsel of the guardians of his early years. To meet the smiles, the frowns, the intrigues, the snares of a world overgrown with poisonous weeds of vice, he is now to stand up, unshielded and alone. Alas, gentlemen, how many, critical experiment, have made fatal wreck of all that is valuable in youth, or worthy to be cherished in riper manhood. Should the physician live to be fourscore years or more, he will ever realise, that the first year that found him an exile from the home of his boyhood, and the sweet accents of maternal counsel, was the touchstone of his future being, the turning point of his existence. "Let me have a nation's youth in my keeping," said one, "and I will make that nation just what I please." And as is the stamp impressed on the yielding character of the young doctor in the first year of his professional enterprise, so will be his future life.

How unspeakably important therefore, gentlemen, is a right commencement in the pathway of human existence, and how imperious the duty of throwing around you that unfailing ægis of protection, which religion and virtue, and these only, can furnish. Wherever the young practitioner may, for the first

time pitch his tent, let him have on his frontlet, engraven, as with the pen of a diamond, and on the rock forever, an inflexible determination to regard the Sabbath and its sacred appurtenances, as the only true safeguards of personal happiness, and of public weal; let him be known, in advance, as the patron of unyielding Temperance; the stern, unbending, iron-heeled foe of gambling, and its brotherhood of infamy, and the snare will be set for him in vain, because, seeing it, he will be prepared to shun it.

Nor will I shrink, on account of its delicacy, from suggesting a most efficient auxiliary to the efforts of the young physician, to plant his feet on the rock of virtuous principle, against which the forked lightning and the thunders of adversity shall beat in vain. In plain English, I mean to say, that one of the best shields with which you can fortify your own good resolutions, and make them permanently effective, is the *choice of a wife*. One of the earliest announcements made by heaven to earth, was the emphatic declaration, "It is not good for man to be alone;" and the experience of the world, from the days of Adam, to the present hour, attests the truth of the proclamation. Were this a proper occasion, it might be edifying and agreeable, to analyse the prominent items in this relation, that conspire to render its existence essential to the well-being of society. But I forbear, since it is too obvious from the brilliant display of intelligent physiognomy before me, that the labor would be lost, and at best a work of supererogation. Were I to put the question to this assembly, to decide the wisdom of the scheme, there would be, not merely no dissenting voice, but such an approving shout, as would well nigh make this stately hall tremble to its foundation. I content myself, therefore, with a brief portraiture, taken from the *Vicar of Wakefield*, of the kind of partner most suitable, especially, for a practitioner of medicine. You know, gentlemen, (at least, I suppose you do,) that the first wife was presented to her husband as a helpmate; not as an incumbrance, a dead weight, a soporific to the best energies of his soul. And in perfect keeping with this sentiment, is the graphic sketch, the genuine life-touch of the author just named. He selected his wife, precisely as she, in the unaffected simplicity of her heart, chose, from a host of samples, the pattern for a dress; not for the fine and gaudy colors, the seeming richness and exquisite beauty of the piece, but because the fabric would *wear well*.

Do not understand me to say, that the first thing to be accomplished after a man gets his diploma, is to procure a wife. That may be very well, if he possess the requisite means of

support. But so soon as the young physician can make a judicious selection of a spot, in which he may advantageously exercise the duties of his calling, then let him look out for the right kind of a partner, to share his joys, and divide his sorrows, the latter he will have in abundance, however few and far between the former may be. To this end, let him chose, in reference to *wearing well*, and not to qualities that may be evanescent as the morning dew; or, if permanent, so much the worse, it may be, by reason of their blighting influence on all his prospects and fond anticipations.

I deal not in fiction nor fancy, when I assert, that if the entire profession in America, had commenced its career in accordance with the principles and views herein set forth, a drunken, an unprincipled, a worthless doctor, would be a term so obsolete, as to constitute, if ever witnessed, an exception to the general rule. If our profession can, by possibility, be regenerated and rescued from the odium that covers it, the glorious result must owe its rise and consummation to the unchangeable purpose of every candidate for a place in its ranks, that virtue, truth and honor, such as heaven only can inspire, shall be his polar star and perpetual guide. That we need reform, as a profession, I never doubted; but it is reformation of heart, rather than of the head.

The next item to be noticed, refers to *the duties of medical men to society*. And the most prominent point here involves our imperious duty, to correct the mistakes so common in society, regarding the laws of professional intercourse, or, as some say, the rules of etiquette. On this cardinal point, very few of our most enlightened citizens are properly informed. It may be, that many persons, in view of the recklessness of some physicians to their competitors, have reached the conclusion, that it is quite unimportant to study even the outlines of medical politeness and propriety. Why should they be very particular about wounding the feelings of their own physician, seeing he cares so little for his professional brother? This is the language of their conduct, even though the sentiment never drop from their lips. There is not a city, nor a town, nor a village, where cases in point do not occur.

In your intercourse with society, when not actually engaged in practical duties, you could do much to correct the evil. Your friends should be taught, that when a case is in the hands of a physician regularly employed, there can be no just plea for taking it from him, without his knowledge or consent. They may fear that he is not managing the case properly, and they may say so to him, or to their friends, in a suitable way. But let them know that it is not only an unpardonable rudeness,

but positive dishonesty, to call in another physician, and to put the patient under his care, without imparting to the first in attendance, the design of so doing, or, of apprising the last, that the case had been already under treatment. Let them be told, that both physicians are thus grievously maltreated; that doctors have a little conscience and some sensibility, as well as patients, and that just such conduct is calculated to array members of the profession against each other, in perpetual hostility.

Physicians who understand, and properly appreciate the laws of professional etiquette, are too modest in efforts to correct the errors of public sentiment. It is their duty, whenever opportunity offers, to assert their rights, and infuse into society a just estimate of the responsibility of physicians, and of the imperious necessity of carrying out at all times, the true principles of professional intercourse, as essential to that spirit of harmony and good order, which should even characterise the labors of the faithful disciples of Esculapius.

It is the duty of physicians, also, to keep with strict fidelity, all secrets of a professional character that have any relation to the peace of society, and to be exceedingly cautious, in reference to matters of family history, or individual character, with which they may become acquainted, unavoidably, from the very nature of their intercourse. "A village doctor," says Mr. Sargent, in one of his *Temperance tales*, "is depository of a great many contrary stories, which, like the contrary winds contained in the bag presented by Æolus to Ulysses, would operate sadly to his disadvantage, if he should suffer them to get loose. The bosom of a physician should resemble the old lion's den in the fable, into which many strange things were seen to enter, but from which none ever returned."

The doctor is the implied, if not the actual confidant of his patrons; and he is bound, not more by his own best interests, than by all the honorable feeling involved in the relation, to keep the trust with unbroken faith, at all times, and in all places, excepting in the possible case, in which the lawful demands of the public weal may rise higher than the supposed urgency of private rights. In these, as well in all other duties, he is bound to keep in perpetual remembrance, the sacred injunction, "do unto others as you would they should do unto you." Were this the hourly motto of his life, his hold on the affections of society would soon acquire a permanency and solidity that no power on earth could move, and above all, he would enjoy the untold happiness that flows from a conscience void of offence.

There is yet another duty to be named, in which physicians and patients have a common interest, and which every young practitioner should keep constantly in view; it is to guard

sedulously against the character of fickleness and instability. You call to mind, some physicians now in very respectable standing, and in comfortable circumstances, who are in the same neighborhood, it may be on the very spot, where they began their professional career. Their patrons felt no fears of being compelled, ever and anon, to make trial of a new doctor, because they saw in their old friend, from the day of his settlement among them, a fixed purpose to be content with his lot. And there he is, rising in esteem, and making sure advances to competency and wealth.

But you have also noticed the ever-shifting, perpetual motion disposition of others, who permit every trifle to mar their prospects and to cast gloom on all around. They do not change, so much from lack of patronage, as from a most unhappy propensity for novelty, and because their ambition is ever looking out for a higher elevation. The truth is, that young doctors too often resemble young preachers, whose literary taste and fondness for a certain kind of society, backed by no trifling amount of vanity and self-esteem, prompt them to eschew the vulgar herd of a country location, in the modest confidence that their proper sphere for usefulness is the large town or the overgrown city. I am inclined to think that a greater blunder cannot be perpetrated by the junior aspirants of either profession. There may be some young men of such splendid talents, and withal so well balanced in character and mind, that an immediate settlement in a large city may be required by the public weal, and may not be prejudicial to themselves. But, gentlemen, these are prodigies so rare, that, like the unlooked for comet, they awe us by their presence, as a thing out of the natural course of events.

A young physician, who regards the opinions of others as well as his own, should not be hasty in choosing a location; but the choice once made, he should go there with the fixed purpose to abide, to make reputation and friends, if possible; and these will be available in the furtherance of his wishes, if at the end of a few years, it should seem advisable to try his fortunes on a more enlarged scale. But let him start out in quest of business, or of fame, as a sort of itinerant, here a year or two, and there a year or two, and he will have a mark upon him as indelible as that which fixed on Cain the destiny of a perpetual wanderer, till at last, a place will not remain, where he can obtain the confidence of men, even were he disposed to seek it earnestly.

I know that young physicians sometimes plead as an apology for change of location, the peculiar trials, perplexities and toils incident to the spot. But, gentlemen, very much of this is

ideal. I know it to be so. The man, young or old, who dreams of absolute ease and quietude in the exercise of any calling, any where on earth, is too Utopian altogether for the common sense walks and duties of this vale of tears. There are trials every where below the stars, and he acts wisely who makes a steady effort to endure with a proper spirit, the buffetings of an unfriendly world. Come they will, and you must be prepared to meet them, not with disgust, for that cannot alter their bearing, but as part of the discipline through which it is needful to go, that, like the precious metals, you may be the purer and the better, for having passed the test of the furnace. The pelting storm and the blackened skies will not last forever. Even in the darkest hour, your eye may catch the heaven-born tints of the bow of promise, as it is about to arch the rolling vault.

"The gloomiest day hath gleams of light,
The darkest wave hath bright foam near it,
And twinkles through the cloudiest night,
Some solitary star to cheer it."

Need I add, gentlemen, in such a time and in such a place, that the young physician is bound by every consideration that can move an honorable, an intelligent man, to devote all the time he can spare from other duties, to the closest study? Those who honor this college with their presence learn too well the vastness of the field before them, to dream that a day will ever find its place in their history, when there will be nothing to be learned in the broad area of medical science. The proudest names on our professional escutcheon can be cited, even to scores, to confirm the well known maxim of the venerable Rush, that a physician should be a student as long as he lives. Do any of you aspire to the inglorious position of drones in the line of science? give books to the bats, and study to the moles, and the prize is certain, without a moment's toil. But does the holy fire of ingenious ambition kindle within you, even now, the purpose to excel? Read, think and observe, as long as you live, and your aspirations shall be gratified.

Gentlemen, farewell. Be it your unchanging aim from this memorable hour, to live for God, your country, and the profession whose badge you are henceforth to wear, and we may congratulate you, even now, as in sight of the goal of your fondest aspirings. We do not invoke for you, a meagre success. A thousand times more cheering, may you portion be. The loftiest posts of honor and renown are now within your grasp, and you may take them, if you will. The higher your standard, the more glorious your success. "Attempt great things, expect great things."